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ABSTRACT

Students learn, understand, and retain knowledge best when they discover it themselves. In the area of semantics, the study of how meaning is conveyed through language, explicit knowledge may appear to be obvious once it becomes conscious, but unless people are explicitly aware of their implicit knowledge and assumptions, they may be at their mercy. Generative semanticists call attention to a distinction between semantic material in a given sentence that is asserted by that sentence and those elements of meaning the sentence presupposes. After examining the presuppositional content of sentences, students quickly understand the concept of presupposition and are then prepared for research projects into such topics as how cultural attitudes toward sex roles are reflected by presuppositions; how social status and personal opinion are reflected through presupposition; what role presupposition plays in humor, literary language, journalistic writing, advertising, and political writing; how and when presupposition appears in the language of children; and how attitudes of teachers, parents, counselors, and other authority figures are revealed by the presuppositions included in their language. (Twenty sample sentences are included along with questions to guide examination of their presuppositional content.) (TJ)

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Teaching Language Inductively:
Uncovering Presuppositions

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Due to the nature of their work, linguists are extremely conscious of the enormous complexity of the intuitive linguistic knowledge of all native speakers. As a matter of fact, for the past several decades linguistic research has been directed toward observing, describing and accounting for this implicit knowledge, a task which is nowhere near completion. If and when a grammar for English is devised which explains thoroughly the knowledge that even a six year old has internalized, allowing spontaneous production of totally novel complex sentences at will, this grammar will represent an unprecedented breakthrough in the field of language science. Nor are linguists the only researchers investigating this problem. A new division of the field of computer science, artificial intelligence, concerned with the problems a computer encounters in attempting to process natural language, is also studying the implicit knowledge of native speakers. Recently I attended a meeting entitled, Interdisciplinary Symposium on Language, Mind and Brain, at which many of the foremost scholars in the fields of linguistics, philosophy, psychology and computer science gathered to share their discoveries regarding the language facility of the human mind. Questions concerning how it is that human beings can automatically process and produce a system as complex as human language will no doubt continue to fascinate, astound and confound scholars for many years to come.

Unfortunately, we, as English teachers, tend to be either unaware or forgetful of the remarkable achievement that our students'

language represents. Instead we focus on those places in their speech and writing where the language system deviates slightly from the "accepted standard" - whatever we conceive that to be. I am not suggesting that we should not be concerned about teaching socially and educationally preferred forms, but it does seem to me that to do so to the extent that we lose awareness of what language really involves is not only an unnecessarily limited view of language study, but may be damaging to the self-image of our students as well.

It is generally accepted that inductive teaching methods are affectively superior to deductive ones; that students learn, understand and retain knowledge easier when they discover it themselves. Unfortunately this principle is rarely applied to the teaching of our own language. I have found that the most effective and interesting method involves investigating with students, how their own language works. This approach works equally well with the study of syntax and semantics. As an illustration of possibilities I will briefly discuss an area of semantics which has been of interest to a number of linguists in the past few years.

An interesting characteristic of semantics, the study of how meaning is conveyed through language, is that once we bring our semantic information to the surface of intellectual consciousness it appears so obvious as to be hardly worth noticing at all, and yet unless we are explicitly aware of our implicit knowledge and assumptions we may be at their mercy. As the general semanticists have

long told us, we are often mislead and even controlled by the unconscious use of language, and much injustice has taken place as a result. During the past decade, a group of linguists called generative semanticists, reacting against the inadequacies of Chomsky's generative transformational model, have been investigating some very revealing semantic and pragmatic aspects of English which previously would be considered outside the scope of grammatical theory. These linguists notice a distinction between semantic material in a given sentence which is asserted by that sentence, and those elements of meaning which the sentence presupposes. For instance, S1

S1 The present king of France is bald.

presupposes (assumes, takes for granted) that there is at this time a being who is the king of France, and asserts only that that being is bald. Since it is not true that France has a king, it would be difficult to interpret any "real world" occurrence of the sentence as anything other than a joke - the sort that attempts to trap the listener into revealing ignorance.

The presuppositional content of sentences we use is not explicit intellectual knowledge usually, but it is real, functional knowledge. In fact, one of the basic

assumptions (presuppositions) we all share about language use is that speakers believe their presuppositions to be true. Indeed, we usually go further than that and assume that the presuppositions are true. Because of this basic faith we have in language users we may be taken in by statements such as S2,

> S2 Because TV is responsible for much violent crime, networks should not be allowed to air programs which show violent actions.

which presupposes that TV is indeed responsible for much violent crime, an assumption which is either untrue or grossly exaggerated. Many Americans would not question this presupposition however, especially if the sentence were communicated by an "authority" they trust, such as newspapers or magazines. They would instead question only whether restricting the networks was the best solution.

I find that students easily understand the concept of presupposition when it is discussed in relation to more familiar words, assume, take for granted, etc., and given a clear understanding of what a presupposition is, which can be accomplished with a few illustrations, they can readily explore the phenomena in their own language as well as the language they hear and read. The first few of the following sentences might be used to illustrate the concept, but very quickly students will be supplying the presuppositional content without assistance. The teacher should insist, however, that the students be exact in their statements

of presuppositions, for the tendency is to have sentences presupposing slightly more than they logically do. This exactness is good training for logical thought and precise statement, invaluable skills for writers as well as linguists. The example sentences are followed by statements of presuppositional material. The questions in parentheses indicate possible directions class discussion and exploration could take.

S3 All Sally's friends think she's crazy.
Presupposes: Sally exists. (Do all proper names presuppose the existence of a referent?)
Presupposes: Sally has friends. (Can you tell how many?)

S4 Both Sally's friends think she's crazy.
Presupposes: Sally has two friends. (Does S4 presuppose Sally has only two friends?)

S5 Sally's friend thinks she is crazy.
Presupposes: Sally has a friend. (Does she have only one?)

S6 Many of Sally's friends think she's crazy.
S7 :A few of Sally's friends think she's crazy.
S8 Few of Sally's friends think she's crazy. (Do S7 and S8 mean exactly the same thing?)

S9 Sally's mother thinks she's crazy.
Presupposes: Sally has a mother who is alive. (What presuppositions are implied in the word mother? human? adult? female? married? What aspect of the sentence makes you know Sally's mother is alive?)

S10 Sally's orthodontist thinks she's crazy.
Presupposes: Sally has an orthodontist. (Does S10 presuppose that Sally wears braces?)

S11 It's neat that you understand your dog's feelings.
Presupposes: You have a dog. Your dog has feelings.

S12 Chicago is where Fred met Sally.
Presupposes: Fred met Sally. Fred and Sally were in Chicago at the same time. (Do presuppositions change when a sentence is made negative?)

S13 Chicago is not where Fred met Sally.
Presupposes: Fred met Sally, but not that Fred and Sally were ever in Chicago at the same time. Note: Some linguists have claimed that negation does not effect presuppositional content. In fact, this has been used as a factor in defining what a presupposition is. S12 and S13 may form a counterexample to this claim, and could be an interesting aspect of language for students to explore in depth.

S14 How the thief escaped will always remain a mystery.
Presupposes: The thief escaped. It is not presently known how this occurred.

S15 Do you think you could wear this dress I've outgrown?
Presupposes: Under normal circumstances, speaker and listener are both female. Note: this is an example of a slightly different kind of presupposition-a presupposition about the context of the utterance rather than one which is logically presupposed by the sentence itself. (Can you think of a context for S15 in which either speaker or listener are not female?) (Can you think of other sentences which presuppose the sex of either speaker or listener?)

S16 Jack cut Kelly's hair six inches.
Presupposes: Kelly's hair was long. (at least over six inches long) (Does S16 presuppose that Kelly is female? Would it have 20 years ago?)

S17 You're not leaving this room until you understand me.
Presupposes: You don't understand me. (Does this presupposition necessarily have to be true?)

S18 Why can't you be like your brother?
Presupposes: You are not like your brother? (Does it presuppose that your brother is better?)

S19 Nalon is a Republican, but she will take the garbage out for you. (Is anything about the speaker's attitude toward Republicans implied by the use of but in S19?)

S20 Which one of you cheated on this test?
Presupposes: One of you cheated on this test. (If only two students are being questioned, does denial cast blame on the other?)

You can begin to see the implications that presuppositions can have for social interaction. I recall a friend relating to

me an adolescent memory of an aunt asking her, without warning, "Margaret Anne, do you masturbate much?"

After examining the presuppositional content of sentences such as S1-S20, and others which students may produce in the course of the investigation, the class should be well equipped to undertake more extensive research projects. The following are some suggestions for possibilities.

1. Whether, and in what ways, cultural attidudes toward sex roles are reflected by presuppositions.

2. Whether, and in what ways, social status is reflected through presupposition.

3. Whether, and in what ways, personal opinion is reflected through presupposition.

4. Examine presuppositions in jokes, riddles, cartoons, etc. Does presupposition play a part in humor?

5. Does presupposition play a part in literary language? Examine figurative, metaphorical language in songs, poems, etc.

6. Investigate the use of presupposition in journalistic writing; newspapers, magazines, TV news, etc.

7. Investigate the use of presupposition in advertising.

8. Investigate the use of presupposition in political writing and speaking.

9. Study the language of young children. Consider their use of presupposition and draw conclusions about how and when presupposition appears in the language acquisition process.

10. Consider ways in which the attitudes of parents, teachers, counsellors and other authority figures toward young people may be revealed by the presuppositions their language includes.

Many other possibilities exist. I intend only to present

viable beginning points. The crucial issue, as I see it, is that language study should be an investigative process, which relies heavily on the students' own knowledge of both the world and of language. In this way our students may learn to enjoy studying about language, and we may begin to build linguistic confidence instead of reinforcing insecurity as has so often been the case in the past.